Character in writing is a phenomenon of verbal clusters recurring in a text. The mere repetition of a word or phrase ("a lively mind," "ashamed of herself," "nice smooth gruel," "Maple Grove") can mark it off from the rest of the language in use and initiate a temporal/spatial pattern that connotes a relative uniqueness. A variety of discourse and situations, we have seen, goes into processing the ontic effects of self and other in a textual field. Yet as long as things are going well, the reader may come under the author's spell and assume for pages the existence of a fictional being within a story. It is our cooperation with the desire represented, Coleridge understood, that makes this illusion a possible experience at all. Seduction ends in disillusion, however, when the reader's critical instincts rebel and try to explain the aesthetic principles at work in the mimesis.

Although (except for Marianne Dashwood) remarkably safe from sexual intrigue, Austen's main characters usually find themselves taken in by someone at least part of the time and live to reflect on their mistaken perceptions. Three novels stage a whole scene with the heroine (Elinor, Elizabeth, and Emma) directly confronting the deceiver (Willoughby, Wickham, and Churchill) after his game is up; and perhaps the most intimate encounters for Catherine and Henry center on Isabella's betrayal, especially when they are alone together reading her letter that explains the broken engagement. Neither Henry Crawford nor Mr. Elliot appears after his disgrace to speak for himself, but again, each culprit's exposure shocks the victims into a recognition of the ugly truth hidden behind graceful manners.

Apart from these extreme cases, numerous people are duped along the way and live to regret it; in fact, anyone who is not eventually disabused is a complete fool. For this reason, Mr. Collins, as J. B. Priestley remarked, is the most fulfilled soul in all of Austen's novels. In their reflexive roles, the disillusioned characters present themselves as reliable truth-tellers at the expense of other characters shown to be only fictional types, tired and sweaty actors without any serious moral purpose.
Notwithstanding the seducer's arts, Austen's more intelligent people understand that it is one's "voluntary delusion," to quote her revered Johnson, which gives the ignis fatuus its irresistible power. Granted the hermeneutic circle inevitable in perceiving events, however, nothing is really certain but belief. The Crown Inn ball exists as a hope for weeks in the breasts of the young Highburians. Yet even as it "actually" takes place, nobody knows exactly what is happening; and because of this ecstatic mingling of intentions the ball is pronounced a success before it is over. Almost immediately afterward, when attention turns abruptly to Harriet's encounter with the gipsies, the ball sinks into oblivion, becoming scarcely a recordable moment for the witnesses themselves. Similarly, Mrs. Bennet tries enthusiastically to conjure up the Meryton ball to her husband but is interrupted while about to describe the "Boulanger" (PP, 13) performed; and the event is lost—to his relief, forever. Hence, the experience of any event is contingent, and not only of brief duration but always of doubtful ontological status.

This temporality, seen in a continual awareness of changing relationships, is the darker side of the conservative belief in permanent values attributed to Austen. Doubtless it gives her characters a peculiar anxiety about the future and motivates them as readers of their world toward some compensating order defined in economic terms. It also reflects their provenance in the text. Like Swift's Modern in A Tale of a Tub, Austen's characters appear to be nervous about the longevity of any book and perpetuate themselves at the expense of discarding other texts. Thus the illusions of romance give way to the illusions of the novel. When Catherine exclaims, "Oh! Mr. Tilney, how frightful.—This is just like a book!—But it cannot really happen to me" (NA, 159), she is articulating the fictional character's last resort—professing facticity by denying her own fictional origins.

Parody is a defense against the encroachment of writing, and Austen's art excels in strategies toward this end, undermining not only sentimental and Gothic romances in particular but the educational value of any book in general. Charlotte Lennox's model seems most explicit in Catherine Morland's and Marianne Dashwood's quixotism, but the later novels show more complex forms of self-delusion, when characters "come alive" with acting Lovers' Vows and even Fanny
succumbs during Henry’s reading of Shakespeare. Without any particular texts mentioned, Emma nevertheless spins out a soap opera with Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon (a man she has never even seen) as well as a Cinderella tale for Harriet; driven by jealousy of Frank Churchill, Mr. Knightley exaggerates Jane’s fatigue after singing too long into the same Gothic tortures that the heroine herself imagines later in the story.

At its worst, quixotism for Austen is a diseased sensibility, a “mind-style” *acquired by uncritical reading of best-sellers. Women characters are usually susceptible to it; but in *Persuasion* it is Captain Benwick who unites “very strong feelings with quiet, serious, and retiring manners, and a decided taste for reading, and sedentary pursuits” (P, 97). Even the critical voice, however, turns against itself: Anne Elliot enjoys a brief gush of egoism while correcting his indulgence in romantic depression and afterwards enjoys still more the thought of her uninvited role as mentor on that occasion. In short, because of the dialogical structure, whether they know it or not, Austen’s characters have a virtual library at their beck and call whenever the situation demands a text; and no particular fictional genre is off-limits.

From the strategy of generating character in various play situations, culminating in speech acts, our discussion concludes with the fictional representation of reading/writing itself. To begin with the media, there is a priority of the written over the spoken word in Austen even though the ideal of letter-writing is “to-the-moment,” in imitation of speech encounters. Other mimetic devices involve the consistent privileging of the written document over the printed medium, as well as an allusive “battle of the books,” with novels winning over romances and sermons.

A key method for rendering a character’s mind is to show him or her engaged in both reading and writing. If the ideal reader constitutes the text in accordance with the author’s intentions, the ability to write well is proof of the same lively mind. This mimetic activity is not for the craven souls in Austen’s world, and, like other bad performances, a character’s difficulties with the text reveal problems in facing situations. Earned only by devaluing rival texts and by contextualizing the moment emphatically, the “language of real feeling” emerges as the ultimate illusion perpetrated on both the internal and external reader of the text.
Radically concerned with its own means of deception, the novel subverts the discourse that the romance takes for granted. Aside from debunking sentimental or Gothic “mind-styles,” Austen’s realistic strategy brings the book as artifact into question; for instance, the opening of *Persuasion* uses the *Baronetage of England* to caricature Sir Walter Elliot’s egomania:

there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt, as he turned over the almost endless creations of the last century—and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed. (*P*, 3)

The only book he ever consulted, we are told, the *Baronetage* nevertheless gratifies Sir Walter’s manic desires perfectly; and the passage detailing his own immediate family tree could produce euphoria when any other page failed. Some editorial changes, however, were necessary to improve the text:

Precisely such had the paragraph originally stood from the printer’s hands; but Sir Walter had improved it by adding, for the information of himself and his family, these words, after the date of Mary’s birth—“married, Dec. 16, 1810, Charles, son and heir of Charles Musgrove, Esq. of Uppercross, in the county of Somerset,”—and by inserting most accurately the day of the month on which he had lost his wife. (*P*, 3)

No matter how limited the character’s time and place in memory, as the adverbs “precisely” and “most accurately” imply, the printed record, updated by hand, satisfies a craving for order and permanence in a world of flux. Both print and manuscript, it can be seen, are the media for giving individual identity.
Besides satirizing aristocratic vanity by describing Sir Walter’s grotesque absorption with the one book that corresponds to a mirror, Austen also implies that this is the only form of autobiography possible for such a hollow character. For a person lacking a tincture of inner life no other text would do, and it is the complete absence of texts that denies him any “inner life” in the first place. Other fools, by contrast, have at least some redeeming literary resources. John Thorpe is not an exemplary reader, but he can educe the titles of *Tom Jones* and *The Monk* as well as name Mrs. Radcliffe and, by default, Fanny Burney. Mr. Collins’s oratorical manner reveals some study of books, and his reading of Fordyce’s sermons gives his antifeminist stance a referentiality. Likewise, as if to suggest that hereditary obtuseness can be improved upon, Austen shows Mr. Rushworth mouthing the ideas of Humphry Repton. What is problematic about Sir Walter, however, is not simply his utter dearth of textuality but his assigned role as father of the heroine; and here the author’s art of reifying consciousness is at odds with her art of parodying character types. That she could entertain these contradictory purposes from the beginning to the end of her writing career testifies to her Sternean reflexivity.

Once cited and brought within the text, books have no independent status but are a function of the character’s “mind-style”; and usually in Austen they are suspect, ersatz objects used for ego gratification rather than real sources of knowledge. Perhaps there is something of Wordsworth in this bias:

> Enough of Science and of Art;  
> Close up those barren leaves;  
> Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
> That watches and receives. 

Discrediting books, however, belongs to the whole anti-intellectual fiction of satire; and bookish characters like Mary Bennet, Mr. Collins, Mrs. Morland, and even Mr. Knightley, who summon moral texts to instruct other characters, are in a tradition as old as literacy. A more specific strategy contrasts “writing-to-the-moment” (Richardson’s term), objectified in the manuscript, to the printed book, a mass-produced commodity of the marketplace; as a consequence of this antithesis, characters stand or fall according to their power of writing and
(almost synonymously) of reading letters, momentary performances essential to reproducing a unique experience. In Austen's world, quixotism at its best is no less than an ecstatic response to a (hand)written text as opposed to the presumably debased encounter with the printed book.

A major advancement of the Gutenberg revolution, according to Elizabeth Eisenstein, was a demystification of the written word through a mechanical and impersonal technology. It is a commonplace of literary history that the literature of the ancient and medieval worlds survived largely by means of memorization and repeated transcriptions on parchment. Under these conditions the medium as well as the message appeared to have an inspired origin. But with the invention of the printing press, literacy underwent qualitative as well as quantitative changes: the printed word became a commodity subject to laws of supply and demand. The economic cost of producing the printed page, now much more calculable than under the monastic system of scribes, gives the fictional character a fresh concern with human mortality. In more ways than one, there is a real price on his head! Perhaps aware of this gloomy fact, after repeated harassments from the elusive enchanter, Don Quixote experiences one of his worst moments when he discovers the printing press at Barcelona to be the fountain of his being.

In light of the novelistic character's birth in the marketplace, it was almost predictable that a shrewd, middle-aged London printer would step in to meet an economic demand with "a new species of writing," something distinctly different from the aristocratic romance long associated with a pre-Gutenberg, oral culture. Without knowing that he is already part of a new genre, Mr. B. predicts his future by referring to an old-fashioned one when he tells Pamela, "we shall make out between us, before we have done, a pretty story in romance I warrant ye." But eventually, after reading her journal in Lincolnshire, his romantic fantasy gives way to the spell of her writing, which, however, is supposedly not the printed text that the actual reader has been engaged with from the start. Mr. B., we are to understand, has been treated to something much more authentic as a reading encounter—the heroine's manuscripts.

As part of the deeper illusion of reality in the novel and a reflexive subterfuge for a printer to adopt, the major
characters tend to disparage books, not just “romances,” as counterfeits for direct experience in the everyday world. It is for the effete Mr. Williams to enjoy such French texts as Fénelon’s *Télémaque* and Boileau’s *Le Lutrin*, and in one scene he is startled when the presumably more virile Mr. B. chances upon him while engrossed in reading. “Writing-to-the-moment,” by contrast, evinces heartfelt energy; and Mrs. Jewkes has reason to seize Pamela’s pen, paper, and ink, as well as her shoes. Despite her vulgarity, moreover, Mrs. Jewkes gives utterance to a truth that Pamela and Mr. B. both share about book learning: “these scholars . . . have not the hearts of mice.” The difference between mice and men is the difference between print and script, an idea brought out when Mr. B. threatens to strip Pamela to get at the letters hidden in her underwear and thus to penetrate the secret of her “inner-most” self. It is this power of divining the origin of one’s textual selfhood, whether as writer or reader (the two roles are interdependent), that sets these characters apart from the merely literate ones.

Reading in a writerly manner is the most valued attainment of Austen’s characters, and thus Catherine Morland’s choice of fiction is not in itself at issue:

> Yes, novels;—for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding—joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. (NA, 37)

This story distinguishes between those who either misread or only pretend to read novels and those who read them imaginatively, even to a visionary extreme. Henry’s disinterested encounter with Gothic romances is a corrective to Catherine’s hallucinatory indulgence; but her penchant for this fiction also stems from the ennui of everyday life, which the newspaper and other pulp media try unsuccessfully to record.

The ironic anti-book theme in *Northanger Abbey* pits even useless written artifacts against the pragmatic tomes that
men of business need to consult. Catherine's desire to light upon a "precious manuscript" is clearly mediated by Radcliffe's mysterious texts, but it may also evidence her boredom with the humdrum duodecimos of the circulating library. A parallel to her sexual awakening with Henry, her motive in reading is toward an encounter with the real thing rather than its printed surrogate: "Her greedy eye glanced rapidly over a page. She started at its import. Could it be possible, or did not her senses play her false?—An inventory of linen, in coarse and modern characters, seemed all that was before her!" (NA, 172).

Notwithstanding this setback, however, Catherine later refuses to believe that General Tilney could actually "be poring over the affairs of the nation for hours" instead of doing something darkly mysterious at night: "To be kept up for hours, after the family were in bed, by stupid pamphlets, was not very likely" (NA, 187). Like the newspaper, which indifferent household heads (Mr. Palmer, General Tilney, Mr. Price) employ to escape domestic conversation, the "stupid pamphlets" do not represent reality as opposed to the illusions of romance: they represent forms of public discourse, of journalistic rhetoric associated with the printing medium, vis-à-vis the private letter. It is a testimony to the barrier between mother and daughter that Mrs. Morland must resort to "a very clever Essay in one of the books up stairs upon much such a subject, about young girls that have been spoilt for home by great acquaintance—"The Mirror," I think" (NA, 241). Such materials are "stupid" because they are inanimate, articles mass-produced for consumption, and thus alien objects for the heroine's real soul hunger, we are to believe.

Whole scenes in Austen show characters struggling with competing forms of discourse; but the personal letter always takes precedence, even over speech, as the most direct expression of the self. The reading/writing experiences sometimes go on simultaneously. As soon as the "anxieties of common life" replace the "alarms of romance," Catherine is finally undeceived about her novel-reading companion after receiving James's account of her breaking their engagement. While the general is safely out of the way "between his cocoa and his newspaper," Catherine reads her brother's letter in Henry's presence; and the triangular situation has the effect of drawing hero and heroine together: "Catherine had not read three lines before her sudden change of countenance, and short exclamations of sorrowing wonder, declared her to be receiving
unpleasant news; and Henry, earnestly watching her through the whole letter, saw plainly that it ended no better than it began” (NA, 202–03). Presumably a record of the moment, undiluted by copyeditor and printer, and secure from the distractions of a face-to-face meeting with the writer, the letter demands the concentrated attention that the sounds of actual speech could never receive. Once produced and sent off, moreover, the letter becomes appropriated by the receiver’s discourse. In this scene what matters is not James’s feelings or Isabella’s callousness, since this information would add nothing to the story; rather, it is the heroine’s experience, shared sympathetically with her beloved, of comprehending at last the treachery of a woman she had trusted. Possible interference from the senex iratus with his newspaper adds stimulus to their intimacy in the reading performance. At this stage in the plot Isabella’s letter of explanation arrives as an anticlimax; Catherine is already fortified enough to read the “strain of shallow artifice” without the assistance of her mentor: “She must think me an idiot, or she could not have written so; but perhaps this has served to make her character better known to me than mine is to her” (NA, 218). Her judgmental response, furthermore, no matter how just, is full of the I-thou awareness and is thus an experience best kept to herself.

In Sense and Sensibility the popular print media bring the lovers together (“The same books, the same passages were idolized by each” [SS, 47]) just as they initiated the friendship between Isabella and Catherine, and again it is the personal letter that occasions a shock of recognition. Bearing earmarks of the epistolary novel form, the scene (SS, II, 7) comprises a triad of voices (Marianne, Elinor, and Mrs. Jennings), but with Elinor’s experience of reading Willoughby’s letter in the foreground. Delaying tactics, especially Mrs. Jennings’s inadvertent chatter about young girls in love, build up suspense; and the sight of “Marianne stretched on the bed, almost choked by grief, one letter in her hand, and two or three others lying by her” (SS, 182) is itself a tableau from the sentimental novel. Since the letter appears in full, Elinor’s moral indignation is almost superfluous; but of relevance here is the power of the medium to activate consciousness:

In her earnest meditations on the contents of the letter, on the depravity of that mind which could dictate it, and, probably, on the very different mind of a
very different person, who had no other connection whatever with the affair than what her heart gave him with every thing that passed, Elinor forgot the immediate distress of her sister, forgot that she had three letters on her lap yet unread, and so entirely forgot how long she had been in the room, that when on hearing a carriage drive up to the door, she went to the window to see who could be coming so unreasonably early. (SS, 184)

Perhaps intuition tells Elinor that this letter was dictated by Miss Grey; in any case, despite the trauma caused to Marianne, it is to Willoughby's credit as a judge of style, if not as a gentleman, that he refrained from writing on this occasion.

One of the mitigating circumstances of Willoughby's confession near the end of the story is his rapport with Elinor while recalling his wife's "depravity" as author, and his remarkable excuse for not answering Marianne's letters beforehand was his supposed inability to avoid clichés to describe their past relationship:

"—Every line, every word was—in the hackneyed metaphor which their dear writer, were she here, would forbid—a dagger to my heart. To know that Marianne was in town was—in the same language—a thunderbolt.—Thunderbolts and daggers!—what a reproof would she have given me!—her taste, her opinions—I believe they are better known to me than my own,—and I am sure they are dearer." (SS, 325)

Willoughby has the sense to know that thunderbolts and daggers, the stuff of potboilers, do not belong in a letter expressing sincere feeling; and so, lacking his own words, he preferred to give rein to the voice of a jealous woman in this triangle. His honest assessment of his role in this dilemma echoes the author's realpolitik: "And after all, what did it signify to my character in the opinion of Marianne and her friends, in what language my answer was couched?—It must have been only to one end. My business was to declare myself a scoundrel, and whether I did it with a bow or a bluster was of little importance" (SS, 328). Despite his failure as a writer, Willoughby disarms Elinor in this scene with his penetration as a reader of his story; and his performance as a speaker eclipses anything done by his counterparts.
The letter not only reveals character but, as with Miss Grey, may be his or her most convincing presence in the narrative. Although such letters as Darcy’s and Frank Churchill’s written to explain themselves after a bad performance, or Collins’s to denounce Lydia after her elopement, all lack tension, others, like Collins’s offer of the “olive branch” or Wentworth’s proposal, are closely integrated with the dialogical language of the text, symbolized by the script/print antithesis. Just as Mr. Bennet retreats to his library to avoid the “anxieties of common life,” so Mr. Collins, lacking the imagination to read or write from the heart, pompously rejects all novels on principle and chooses Fordyce’s sermons for drawing-room entertainment. Given his intention to wield a sexist authority over the Bennet girls, he deserves, of course, to be interrupted; but his words nevertheless have dramatic irony for Lydia: “I have often observed how little young ladies are interested by books of a serious stamp, though written solely for their benefit. It amazes me, I confess;—for certainly, there can be nothing so advantageous to them as instruction” (PP, 69). Collins’s offer to play backgammon with Mr. Bennet immediately after this lecture and his refusal to renew the sermon despite the women’s entreaties suggest that “books of a serious stamp” hold little real interest for him either. Books for both men are instruments of power, not the means of what Johnson called “exchanging minds.”

2. The Writerly Reader

Austen’s characters, men as well as women, have notoriously little to do but think and talk about each other. They sometimes engage in outdoor activities like walking and riding, but most of the time characters exist primarily as discourse. No wonder, then, that the act of reading has special importance for hero and heroine alike. To write well, one must also read well—read, as Pope advised, “With the same Spirit that its Author writ.” In terms of the daily drama of Austen’s novels, then, reading the text of the other character is an act requiring not only intelligence, perspicacity, and disinterestedness: ideally it involves “exchanging minds,” a creative immersion of self in the other.

Among the other kinds of performances, some impor-
tant scenes depict the central character engaged with a text, whether as a reader or as a letter-writer, and for good measure sometimes both. In *Pride and Prejudice* two successive scenes at Netherfield, which divide groups into card-players (non-readers), on the one hand, and readers/writers, on the other, show the hero's personal integrity in conversation with alzons. In the first (I, 10), Mr. Hurst and Mr. Bingley play piquet, with Mrs. Hurst as observer, while Mr. Darcy writes a letter to his sister, indubitable proof of his finer tone, and Elizabeth does needlework and derives quiet amusement from Miss Bingley's attempts to ingratiate herself by offering to mend his pen and flattering him: "The perpetual commendations of the lady either on his hand-writing, or on the evenness of his lines, or on the length of his letter, with the perfect unconcern with which her praises were received, formed a curious dialogue" (*PP*, 47). Miss Bingley is quite literally without penetration, unable to invade the hero's privacy to meet the inner self engaged in his correspondence with Georgiana; hence, in her hopeless isolation, she can only talk idly about the mechanics of penmanship. Mr. Bingley, however, addresses the provenance of writing and makes an unlucky comparison of his friend's careful style to his own spontaneous letters, which elicits a sharp attack on the pretense of humility and the hidden claim of inspiration:

"—for you are really proud of your defects in writing, because you consider them as proceeding from a rapidity of thought and carelessness of execution, which if not estimable, you think at least highly interesting. The power of doing any thing with quickness is always much prized by the possessor, and often without any attention to the imperfection of the performance." (*PP*, 48–49)

Writing should reveal emotion, we are to understand, but it also requires a measured choice of words to communicate ideas forcefully—the plain style used in Darcy's letter of explanation to Elizabeth, and in Mrs. Gardiner's as well. Miss Bingley's "raptures" and Mr. Bingley's "rapidity of thought" are the clichés of romantic authorship and egotism that Willoughby himself deplored.

In the second scene (I, 11), after the failure of his request to play cards ("Mr. Darcy did not wish for cards"), "Mr.
Hurst had therefore nothing to do, but to stretch himself on one of the sophas and go to sleep" (PP, 54); and his wife occupied herself "in playing with her bracelets and rings" as well as in joining intermittently the dialogue between Jane and her brother. As before, Mr. Darcy is absorbed in reading instead of writing; and again Miss Bingley exposes her illiteracy in her stabs at conversation:

At length, quite exhausted by the attempt to be amused with her own book, which she had only chosen because it was the second volume of his, she gave a great yawn and said, "How pleasant it is to spend an evening in this way! I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of any thing than of a book!—When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library."

No one made any reply. (PP, 55)

Besides the broad hint about the library at Pemberley, her effusion over the pleasure of reading is a transparent ruse to interrupt the hero's silent focus on a text; as in the faux pas committed by the Thorpes in rivalry with Catherine's genuine knowledge of books, so this braggadocio's empty words are enough to condemn her and do not merit comment from the others.

Later, while dancing with Elizabeth at the Lucases', Mr. Darcy proposes a subject for conversation that Miss Bingley no doubt would have seized upon greedily, to her detriment:

"What think you of books?" said he, smiling. "Books—Oh! no.—I am sure we never read the same, or not with the same feelings."

"I am sorry you think so; but if that be the case, there can at least be no want of subject.—We may compare our different opinions."

"No—I cannot talk of books in a ball-room; my head is always full of something else."

"The present always occupies you in such scenes—does it?" said he, with a look of doubt.

"Yes, always," she replied, without knowing what she said, for her thoughts had wandered far from the subject. (PP, 93)
Without knowing what she said. In contrast to Miss Bingley, who had talked designedly to no avail, Elizabeth gains in Darcy’s esteem by her spontaneous expressiveness and utter lack of affectation. Above all, with the earlier scene in mind, Mr. Darcy can deduce her genuine seriousness as a reader from her refusal to make small talk about books. Thanks to the previous negative stimulus from Miss Bingley, in other words, the protagonists are nudged as well as drawn together in a textual enterprise.

At best, reading is the word made flesh, a reification of ciphers on the written or printed page. Characters too energized to make this mental effort grope blindly at the text and as a last refuge make a fetish of the writer’s tools. For instance, Harriet’s mementoes of Mr. Elton’s “courtship” are suspicious on various counts. These “relics” contrast the heroine’s critical detachment from her protégée’s sentimentalizing of trivia; but this exaggerated homage to writing implements reveals more than Harriet’s dull wits, already well recognized at this stage: the objects reveal a secret about Mr. Elton—his accident while trying to write:

“—Do not you remember his cutting his finger with your new penknife, and your recommending court plaister?—But as you had none about you, and knew I had, you desired me to supply him; and so I took mine out and cut him a piece; but it was a great deal too large, and he cut it smaller, and kept playing some time with what was left, before he gave it back to me. And so then, in my nonsense, I could not help making a treasure of it—so I put it by never to be used, and looked at it now and then as a great treat.” (E, 338)

As Emma admits in this scene that she had had some court plaster at the time but wanted Harriet to use hers instead to enhance her intimacy with Mr. Elton, the erotic significance of the material is explicit. When linked to Harriet’s “superior treasure,” that is, the “end of an old pencil,—the part without any lead” (E, 339), a pattern emerges: both mementoes derive from Mr. Elton’s problems when cutting a writing instrument (pen and pencil) and needing the women’s help; in the first instance, Emma’s “new penknife” proves dangerous; in the second, the pencil runs out of lead.

The pen, Anne Elliot reminds us (P, 234), has tradi-
tionally been the man's prerogative; and Mr. Darcy knows better than to allow Miss Bingley to mend his: "Thank you—but I always mend my own" (PP, 47). Likewise, it is the bestowing of this power to write that forms the earliest bond between Fanny and Edmund:

they went together into the breakfast-room, where Edmund prepared her paper, and ruled her lines with all the good will that her brother could himself have felt, and probably with somewhat more exactness. He continued with her the whole time of her writing, to assist her with his penknife or his orthography, as either were wanted; and added to these attentions, which she felt very much, a kindness to her brother, which delighted her beyond all the rest. (MP, 16)

Harriet's mementoes are not just a reiteration of her nonsensical attitude; in the context of Mr. Elton's uxorious role in marriage, these artifacts, in retrospect, suggest that he was never man enough to be Emma's husband, if only because he could not handle her (appropriately) sharp penknife! Moreover, as Harriet is no more successful than Miss Bingley in entering a man's heart through his writing instrument, the first-aid remnant and broken pencil should tell that her loss is not to be mourned. Notwithstanding Mr. Elton's facility at charades, Emma proves to be right about his shallow expressions of gallantry and in suspecting his mercenary motives while proposing to her in the carriage. Possessing so little writer's promise, therefore, it is not unexpected that Mr. Elton is an indifferent reader, capable of winning only Harriet as an audience during her portrait sessions: "Harriet listened, and Emma drew in peace" (E, 47).

Despite the reputation attributed to her by the ironic narrator in the first chapter, Emma Woodhouse from the very beginning is an alert, circumspect reader, equal to Mr. Knightley in critical judgment and more daring in imagination. In fact, one character, Robert Martin, who is denied any actual conversation, presents himself largely through the response that his letter involuntarily creates in Emma's mind. At first, outward signs reinforce the heroine's prejudice against his class: "I had no idea that he could be so very clownish, so totally without air" (E, 32). Yet upon reading his letter to Harriet, she changes her mind:

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There were not merely no grammatical errors, but as a composition it would not have disgraced a gentleman; the language, though plain, was strong and unaffected, and the sentiments it conveyed very much to the credit of the writer. It was short, but expressed good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling. (E, 50–51)

Against the possibility that someone had dictated the letter, Emma asserts, with authorial license, that "it is not the style of a woman; no, certainly, it is too strong and concise; not diffuse enough for a woman" (E, 51). In this act of reading, she enters Mr. Knightley’s discourse exactly: "It is so with some men. Yes, I understand the sort of mind." 16

Good writing is of a piece with good reading; and, as expected, Robert Martin’s taste in books is not frivolous. To Emma’s question concerning his background beyond farming, Harriet replies faltering:

“but I believe he has read a good deal—but not what you would think any thing of. He reads the Agricultural Reports and some other books, that lay in one of the window seats—but he reads all them to himself. But sometimes of an evening, before we went to cards, he would read something aloud out of the Elegant Extracts—very entertaining. And I know he has read the Vicar of Wakefield. He never read the Romance of the Forest, nor the Children of the Abbey. He had never heard of such books before I mentioned them, but he is determined to get them now as soon as ever he can.” (E, 29)

Martin’s effort to accommodate his reading to Harriet’s supposed interests in books is good-natured, but his failure to do so implies the same masculine activism that Mr. Knightley and his brother represent in the story: “He has not been able to get the Romance of the Forest yet. He was so busy the last time he was at Kingston that he quite forgot it, but he goes again to-morrow” (E, 32). If the evidence of his reading that same potpourri used at Hartfield, Elegant Extracts, passes without comment, it may also be significant that the heroine is silent on his ignorance of Gothic romances. Martin’s choice of Goldsmith, however, probably reveals a Johnsonian seriousness about fiction.
In view of Martin's proven qualities as reader and writer, Emma's premature judgment of his education resounds with dramatic irony:

"How much his business engrosses him already, is very plain from the circumstances of his forgetting to inquire for the book you recommended. He was a great deal too full of the market to think of anything else—which is just as it should be, for a thriving man. What has he to do with books? And I have no doubt that he will thrive and be a very rich man in time—and his being illiterate and coarse need not disturb us." (E, 33-34)

As Emma discovers shortly after this scene, Martin's letter reveals a natural gentility rather than a bookish head; and if business prevents his spending much time at the circulating library, his reading of the agricultural reports, the kind of professional habit the Knightleys also exercise, probably contributes to the "English verdure, English culture, English comfort" (E, 360) that she herself so admires.

Emma's talk about education is really for Harriet's benefit and is intended to denigrate Martin; her own capacity to read imaginatively owes little to the medium of print, as Mr. Knightley attests:

"Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing up at various times of books that she meant to read regularly through—and very good lists they were—very well chosen, and very nearly arranged—sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen—I remember thinking it did her judgment so much credit, that I preserved it some time; and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding." (E, 37)

Mr. Knightley's indictment here may be tongue-in-cheek; in any case, his emphasis upon quantity and encyclopedic method, the heritage of the printing revolution and the intellectual achievement of the Enlightenment, is unlikely to im-
prove a lively mind. In the end he recants self-mockingly: "It was very natural for you to say, what right has he to lecture me?—and I am afraid very natural for you to feel that it was done in a disagreeable manner. I do not believe I did you any good. The good was all to myself, by making you an object of the tenderest affection to me" (E, 462). In thus renouncing his educational program Mr. Knightley may be only speaking out of love; and Austen's text lacks the tendentiousness of Wordsworth: "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings." Yet, without sending her characters off to a vernal wood to gain wisdom, Austen does imply a norm that undermines the importance of books to stress the intuition of the individual mind: "Nature gave you understanding" (E, 462). Neither books nor mentor can do much to improve a reader who lacks this natural gift.

3. The Violence of the Word

Only a few characters are capable of reading in a writerly manner, and sometimes even they lack the will to cope with the text. Authentic experience, not the standardization of that experience in book form, is the aim of the encounter, as the contrast between a line of poetry and the published interpretation suggests: "The course of true love never did run smooth—A Hartfield edition of Shakespeare would have a long note on that passage" (E, 75). Given her sureness in penetrating the written text, therefore, Emma's quixotism derives not from books or letters but from narratives related by others, which are, in turn, sometimes a character's account of a letter. Because of Emma's lexical acuity, in fact, the written word can be a threatening presence, not to be glossed over but physically shunned if at all possible. In her triangular confrontations with others, however, the relative freedom of the speech act stimulates her imagination to "read" self-serving arrangements of motives and actions. Thus, from hatred of the speaker and jealousy of the subject, Emma deliberately avoids the possibility of having the romance she has just spun proven illusory by confronting the actual document: "though much had been forced on her against her will, though she had in fact heard the whole substance of Jane Fairfax's letter, she had been able to escape the letter itself" (E, 162). Like Emma, Mr. Knightley
appears to gain access to Frank Churchill's letters at times, but he cannot be trusted to read a rival's narrative disinterestedly: "His letters disgust me" (E, 149). Although perceiving Churchill in the guise of a Lovelace or Montoni throughout the earlier intrigues, the hero at last reads the erstwhile villain's "very thick letter" (E, 436) and concedes: "Well, there is feeling here.—He does seem to have suffered in finding her ill.—Certainly, I can have no doubt of his being fond of her" (E, 447). Secure in possession of his beloved, the hero can afford to respond to the text in the spirit expressed by the author.

As in any performance, an element of danger enters into the act of reading to stimulate the faculties into the requisite "flow." Characters who lack this energy and courage retreat into illiteracy to blinker themselves from the informing word. Mrs. Bates, we know, requires special handling whenever a letter from Jane arrives; and the fear of reading or hearing any bad news about the girl implies the essential violence of writing per se. This old woman's blindness finds a parallel in Mr. Woodhouse's susceptibility to drafts (invasion of privacy) and his cowering behind the shrubbery. Not only is he unable to read, but on one occasion he suffers a significant loss of memory.

Mr. Woodhouse's repeated efforts to recall the popular riddle "Kitty, a fair but frozen maid" (E, 1, 9) are symptomatic of his neurotic withdrawal from life and dependence on his daughter's protection. The occasion unites him with another illiterate, Harriet, who is "collecting and transcribing all the riddles of every sort that she could meet with, into a thin quarto of hot-pressed paper, made up by her friend, and ornamented with cyphers and trophies" (E, 69). Although Harriet's attention, like Miss Bingley's, is typically drawn to the mechanics of writing—the hot-pressed paper and careful penmanship—rather than to the interpretation of the word games, throughout the chapter inspiration, memory, and arcane language are the subjects of conversation; and for the only time in the novel Mr. Elton attains a certain eloquence.

Promoted by his misplaced feelings for Emma, Elton's memory is quick all the while Mr. Woodhouse is fumbling for more than the first line of the elusive riddle:

[Mr. Elton] was invited to contribute any really good enigmas, charades, or conundrums that he might rec-
and she had the pleasure of seeing him most intently at work with his recollections; and at the same time, as she could perceive, most earnestly careful that nothing ungallant, nothing that did not breathe a compliment to the sex should pass his lips. They owed to him their two or three politest puzzles; and the joy and exultation with which at last he recalled, and rather sentimentally recited, that well-known charade,

My first doth affliction denote,
Which my second is destin'd to feel
And my whole is the best antidote
That affliction to soften and heal.—

made her quite sorry to acknowledge that they had transcribed it some pages ago already. (E, 70)

An interpretative problem quietly injected in all this activity concerns authorship and intention. The "well-known charade" derives from the oral tradition of folklore and as such belongs to the generations of people who passed it down through memory. Like other forms in this tradition, notably the ballad, folk song, and country dance, it is being removed from a local speech-oriented culture and recorded in book collections for enjoyment by a general reading public. Perhaps a major reason that characters in this scene are having difficulty with their memories is their greater reliance on books as an ersatz mind, in imitation of Swift's Modern. Because it is a radically closed text, the charade offers a number of dramatic ironies within the action: characters are divided according to their ability to recall the exact words of the poem, to solve its verbal puzzle, and even to compose an original one. Mr. Elton has the energy to do all three but nevertheless fails to communicate his intention adequately to his readers. Emma is expert at solving the riddles but not at interpreting the writer's intention. Harriet and Mr. Woodhouse, of course, are utterly incompetent to read any text and also lack the memory requisite to oral, illiterate culture.

Without narrative interference, characters struggle alone against the resistant language and find meanings to fit their individual needs. When Mr. Elton returns the "very next day" with a conundrum of his own making, only Emma

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solves it but attributes its object as Harriet. Mr. Woodhouse, without comprehending a word of it, nevertheless feels sure of its author: "—Nobody could have written so prettily, but you, Emma" (E, 78). Her reading of it, moreover, momentarily evokes his past life: "Your dear mother was so clever at all those things! If I had but her memory! But I can remember nothing;—not even that particular riddle which you have heard me mention; I can only recollect the first stanza; and there are several." Mr. Woodhouse's problem, of course, involves more than mere forgetfulness: for one reason or another he lacks the energy to read and instead relies on the voice for verbal communication. When told that it is one of David Garrick's charades in Elegant Extracts and that it is already copied out in Harriet's album, Mr. Woodhouse is mysteriously addled:

"Aye, very true—I wish I could recollect more of it.

Kitty, a fair but frozen maid.
The name makes me think of poor Isabella; for she was very near being christened Catherine after her grandmama." (E, 79)

The fact that the riddle has been found in a book is not much comfort to this illiterate; and unless he can recall the text by memory it will remain forever out of reach. The cause of his amnesia, however, needs interpretation.

Presumably the reader himself is expected to remember the poem attributed to Garrick, which sometimes substitutes the word forward for frozen:

Kitty, a fair, but frozen maid,
Kindled a flame I still deplore;
The hood-wink'd boy I call'd in aid,
Much of his near approach afraid,
So fatal to my suit before.

At length, propitious to my pray' r,
The little urchin came;
At once he fought the midway air,
And soon he clear'd, with dextrous care,
The bitter relics of my flame.

To Kitty, Fanny now succeeds,
She kindles slow, but lasting fires:

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With care my appetite she feeds;  
Each day some willing victim bleeds,  
To satisfy my strange desires.

Say, by what title, or what name,  
Must I this youth address?  
Cupid and he are not the same,  
Tho’ both can raise, or quench a flame—  
I’ll kiss you, if you guess.

The name of the youth, we know, is chimney sweeper;  
and the speaker in the poem is the chimney, who was nearly set afire by Kitty’s careless kindling technique; the emended “forward maid” refers to her haste in building the fire, while “frozen maid” tells us her motive in being “forward.” Although Cupid and the chimney sweeper are not the same, the persona of the poem is clearly male and is nervous about being in the hands, if not in the arms, of women. In the epoch of the prince regent, to whom this novel is dedicated, the lines “Each day some willing victim bleeds, / To satisfy my strange desires” would invite an erotic interpretation unsuspected by Mr. Woodhouse, who, we may assume, has repressed the violence of desire to the extent of numbing all sensations of the living body. As Alice Chandler has suggested, the “flame I still deplore” may allude to venereal disease, of which the persona is cured by the urchin of the second stanza. Fanny, in the third stanza, is apparently a virginal partner; and the image of the chimney sweeper connotes in general the idea of sexual intercourse. However we read this scene, it is at least clear that while Mr. Elton’s wordplay is tamely decorous, the riddle Mr. Woodhouse is attempting to recall is remarkably erotic; and indeed the subject matter may be responsible for his amnesia.

In a novel where much of the action concerns reading and reflexively imitates the actual reader’s confrontation with the text, Austen’s strategy of alluding to a popular riddle which, as is often the case, hints darkly of a sexual relationship frees her of the onus of authorial intentionality and posits the anonymous conditions of folklore by placing the burden on her audience. Unlike Mrs. Bates’s dependence on her daughter to read Jane’s letters, Mr. Woodhouse’s incapacity toward the written text is not caused by laziness or fear of bad news; instead, it appears to conceal a sexual problem of some kind,
perhaps analogous to the one revealed in the riddle. Almost as if someday she anticipated volumes of hermeneutics to explain the mystery, the puckish author seems to be teasing the reader here. In contrast to another fictional widower, Squire Allworthy, who continues to love his wife beyond the grave, Mr. Woodhouse seems to have compensated for the loss of his spouse by forming an emotional attachment to his daughter that waives all male libido under the incest taboo. The role of psychosomatic invalid, perhaps unconsciously assumed, at times surfaces as a deliberate means of shirking responsibilities, as in his refusal to attend the Coles's party and the ball at the Crown Inn. But the cost of denying the body is seen not only in his mental block toward anything erotic but more generally in a failure of desire: hence, his energy level is inferior even to Harriet's feeble wit in trying to probe Mr. Elton's charade. One reads with the body, and the strength of the word is commensurate with the imaginative responsiveness of the perceiver.

Granted this freedom—and challenge—we may see such behaviors as the restrictive diet of "nice smooth gruel, thin, but not too thin," the phobia about drafts, dampness, and almost any meteorological condition, and the hysteria over venturing beyond the shrubbery or the fireplace, as regressive "feminine" denials of energy that the heroine must surmount in her quest for deliverance from male hegemony. Beneath the mantle of sensibility, Mr. Woodhouse unwittingly gives utterance to all the dire fears about sexual union as death. His mournful compassion toward women who marry, and also toward the children who result from parturition, which like death is a mysterious and violent fact of human life, is thus ambivalent: "Ah! poor Miss Taylor! 'tis a sad business"; "poor Isabella"; and her "poor little dears." The Westons' wedding cake was poison to Mr. Woodhouse for reasons other than its enzymes. His premonitions of death at the idea of marriage—and, implicitly, sexual intercourse—underlie his stubborn insistence on the rules of politeness due a bride, when he suddenly assumes patriarchal authority in insisting on Emma's duty to Mrs. Elton (E, 280).

Ironically, though again no one in the scene appears to notice, it takes Mrs. Elton's vulgar airs to pronounce the unthinkable about Mr. Woodhouse:
“Here comes this dear old beau of mine, I protest!—Only think of his gallantry in coming away before the other men!—what a dear creature he is;—I assure you I like him excessively. I admire all that quaint, old-fashioned politeness; it is much more to my taste than modern ease; modern ease often disgusts me. But this good old Mr. Woodhouse, I wish you had heard his gallant speeches to me at dinner. Oh! I assure you I began to think my caro sposa would be absolutely jealous.” (E, 302)

His “gallant speeches” were probably no more than a gratuitous compliment on her gown and other polite gestures; yet Mrs. Elton’s typically gross interpretation raises at least the possibility of some libido in Emma’s father and thus accounts for his interest in bawdy charades. In sum, unlike Sir Walter Elliot, Mr. Woodhouse has a prodigious “inner life” encoded in his text; and though not a talker to compete with Miss Bates, he too possesses secrets worth probing.

4. The “Language of Real Feeling”

Austen’s carnivalesque prose mimics layer upon layer of texts, rendering characters within a spectrum ranging from parodic types, with a minimum of signifiers, to complex modes of discourse; and as we have seen, both extremes may appear in the same character at different points in the story. Although numerous “empty spaces” usual to narrative appear in her presentation,22 where some indeterminacies like the allusion to “Kitty” may be functional to the characterization, as if aware of the need for control, Austen seems deliberately to thematize the hermeneutic play required of her readers. Without going so far as Richardson’s creation of “spare parts kits” like the elaborate footnotes and other intrusive commentary appended to the text of Clarissa,23 Austen is nevertheless at pains to offer specimens of ideal discourse to assist us in our interpretative efforts. Thus, in her fiction negative performances that break the rules of an encounter are always instructive; and a perceptive reader like Fanny Price musters the heroism to reduce Babel itself to harmony for the moment. During her exile in
Portsmouth, for example, Fanny can be grateful even for Mary Crawford's flippant writing: "There was great food for meditation in this letter, and chiefly for unpleasant meditation; and yet, with all the uneasiness it supplied, it connected her with the absent, it told her of people and things about whom she had never felt so much curiosity as now, and she would have been glad to have been sure of such a letter every week" (MP, 394). Apart from the practical interest of correspondence, to be connected with the absent is a motive of writing itself; and almost any shred of text suffices to initiate the reading process. But, of course, the absent varies in intensity to the present in accordance with the "mind-style" established in the language.

Reading/writing is a process, a performance; and in a moment of emotional stress even normally inert minds can suddenly become expressive. One of the most powerful letters in Mansfield Park appears only fragmentarily in the text, but its import is mediated through Fanny's consciousness. During Tom's illness, Lady Bertram has been keeping her niece at Portsmouth informed with reports regularly transmitted to Fanny, in the same diffuse style, and the same medley of trusts, hopes, and fears, all following and producing each other at hap-hazard. It was a sort of playing at being frightened. The sufferings which Lady Bertram did not see, had little power over her fancy; and she wrote very comfortably about agitation and anxiety, and poor invalids, till Tom was actually conveyed to Mansfield, and her own eyes had beheld his altered appearance. (MP, 427)

Without being directly on the scene, this emblem of moral sloth has used the word as a means of distancing herself from the crisis; but the visual encounter strikes a nerve that arouses her at last: "Then, a letter which she had been previously preparing for Fanny, was finished in a different style, in the language of real feeling and alarm; then, she wrote as she might have spoken."

Besides the continual privileging of the manuscript over printed matter, Austen's text insinuates still another code to register sincere character—a written language that seems equivalent to speech. To show the metamorphosis (temporary) of a character from insincere to sincere writer a "different style" is required, one that can somehow overcome the polar-
ity between the ciphers on the page and the actual heat of emotion. The attempt is vain, finally, because the sincere ideal rising above discredited discourse is also found to be a role, bound to a rhetorical style in a vicious circle. Without subscribing to his pastoral ideology, Austen resembles Wordsworth in her goal of arranging "a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation"; but contrary to this poet's belief that feelings create the situation, her narratives, as we have seen, give priority to situation as the cause of feelings."

In her mimetic scale advancing from the published book to the "precious manuscript" toward authentic experience, the ultimate trick is altogether to disclaim writing, under certain circumstances, in favor of speech—or rather, of "speech"—the final illusion to be conjured up from the printed page.

Previously, we have seen Austen's extensive use of direct discourse and free indirect discourse to project character immediately in the text, unadulterated by the narrator's judgments. Since her alazons are usually bundles of uncontrollable speech-making, it is not enough simply to renounce writing within a context as a means of promoting the "language of real feeling." On the contrary, a speech encounter like Darcy's ill-fated proposal at Hunsford (PP, 189-93) or Wentworth's stilted conversation at the White Hart ("Whether he would have proceeded farther was left to Anne's imagination to ponder over in a calmer hour" [P, 225]) fails to communicate the "inner self" to the other and needs a subsequent letter of explanation to reveal the character's sincere motives.

To write as one "might have spoken," then, is no guarantee of "real feeling" when a character is only a tinkling cymbal. Relatively few scenes, in fact, ever privilege speech over writing; and the most notable examples are in Persuasion, where the heroine's interior monologue foregrounds the action and her "actual" voice goes almost unheard throughout the story. Anne Elliot's unusually assertive conversation with Captain Benwick about Byron and Scott, celebrated writers whose influence she criticizes, gives speech rather than script precedence over books; and upon recall the event amuses even the normally restrained performer (P, 101).

That scene prepares us, moreover, for the finale at the White Hart, when she speaks eloquently to Captain Harville about the sexes while her lover is writing a letter. This is a tour de force of competing discourses—written, printed, and oral
simultaneously; and at least during the moment of the encounter it appears as if the tongue is mightier than pen, print, or sword! What activates the harangue on a woman's constancy are conversations about real events (Mrs. Musgrove and Mrs. Croft on Henrietta's engagement, Captain Harville on Louisa's), and Anne gains her voice from a “nervous thrill” that is communicated automatically to Wentworth and causes his pen to stop writing; at a later moment, it even falls from his hand and alters her sense of audience, thus implying her complete loss of self-consciousness in the performance: “Anne was startled at finding him nearer than she had supposed, and half inclined to suspect that the pen had only fallen, because he had been occupied by them, striving to catch sounds, which yet she did not think he could have caught” (P, 233-34). Then, as if by association with this accident, Anne rises to the occasion when Harville makes the mistake of appealing to printed texts as evidence against her feminist dissent:

“But let me observe that all histories are against you, all stories, prose and verse. If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy. Songs and proverbs, all talk of woman's fickleness. But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men.”

“Perhaps I shall.—Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing.” (P, 234)

After several centuries of the Gutenberg press, Anne is aware of man's enhanced power through the mass media and, quite understandably, dismisses the manufactured opinion that has standardized woman's inferior character in the long campaign for male supremacy. Though politically “correct,” Anne's eloquent speech in this context seems a trifle forced, like one of Mr. Knightley's or even Mr. Collins's “lectures.” The triangular situation here offsets her words ironically, as Captain Wentworth has just lost his pen and Captain Harville probably never uses one. In fact,
the real target of this attack is not the pen but the male press, and of the various captains in this story Benwick is the only one subject to the influence of books. Harville, who tries lamely to argue from printed authority, "was no reader; but he had contrived excellent accommodations, and fashioned very pretty shelves, for a tolerable collection of well-bound volumes, the property of Captain Benwick" (P, 99). Instead of a pen, Harville wields a brush or an awl to keep his mind employed according to a Johnsonian standard: "He drew, he varnished, he carpentered, he glued; he made toys for the children, he fashioned new netting-needles and pins with improvements; and if every thing else was done, sat down to his large fishing-net at one corner of the room" (P, 99).

Like Austen's positive characters in general, male or female, Harville is anything but bookish and presents himself effortlessly toward others: "Captain Harville, though not equalling Captain Wentworth in manners, was a perfect gentleman, unaffected, warm, and obliging" (P, 97). Arising from a spontaneous impulse to vent her repressed feelings vis-à-vis Wentworth, therefore, this feminist speech addressed to Harville is really beside the point; but indirectly, of course, Anne's message of undying love reaches the right person with great force.

No matter how climactic, this scene is too deliberately staged with podium and props to render the quintessential "language of real feeling." It is after the feminist oratory, however, that the narrator describes a necessary condition of this privileged language: "Captain Wentworth was folding up a letter in great haste, and either could not or would not answer fully" (P, 236). To write as one would have spoken from immediate emotion requires an unfinished form to convey "—the work of an instant!" (P, 236). Mr. Bingley's principle of writing-to-the-moment was not itself at fault, but rather his pretense of using it as an excuse for careless expression. Otherwise, since spontaneity is of the highest value in an encounter, writing that approaches the circumstances of excited speech will suppress the past and focus on the incomplete moment of composition. The lovers in this scene never talk directly to each other about their feelings; instead, the one delivers an irrelevant speech to a third person while the other hastily responds to her in writing.

Not speech heard, but speech read, we are to understand, is the ultimate context of heartfelt exchange. Two dis-
crete moments are involved in the reunion of minds here: his written response to her speech and her reading of that response. To be connected with the absent is the universal desire of the writer; and thus, paradoxically, it is not fulfillment, the real thing—motion—but the incomplete text, the quasi transcript of speech—symbolic action—that reveals the "innermost" self.

In the grip of the tension of his own shyness about speaking directly to Anne, as well as his consciousness of the others present, Wentworth has no tongue here, only a pen: "I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach" (P, 237). Even when the two lovers are in the same room, they are absent from each other and can only meet through the written text; and the lover’s discourse repeats the familiar questions about interpreting signs of his desire simultaneously with her outpouring about constancy:

“For you alone I think and plan.—Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes?—I had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you must have penetrated mine. I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice, when they would be lost on others.” (P, 237)

If writing the letter releases tension in the performance while building it up in the spectator, reading it afterward is cathartic to a dangerous extent: “The revolution which one instant had made in Anne, was almost beyond expression” (P, 237). But as if to prevent fulfillment of desire too early, others arrive to interrupt her euphoric privacy:

The absolute necessity of seeming like herself produced then an immediate struggle; but after a while she could do no more. She began not to understand a word they said, and was obliged to plead indisposition and excuse herself. They could then see that she looked very ill—were shocked and concerned—and would not stir without her for the world. This was dreadful! Would they only have gone away, and left her in the quiet possession of that room, it would have
been her cure; but to have them all standing or wait­
ing around her was distracting, and, in desperation, she said she would go home. (P. 238; my emphasis)

The encounter with the letter, as the free indirect discourse shades in (my italics), eclipses all social ties for the moment and increases desire in inverse proportion to the interference from the others in the scene. Although she longs for the “pos­sibility of speaking two words to Captain Wentworth,” Anne’s first impulse is toward “the quiet possession of that room,” the reader’s solitary space.

Within the Austen story, then, the “language of real feeling” derives from a situation of competing discourses—printed versus written versus spoken versus “spoken” (written)—that is represented as being read, as well as written, utterly without any regard to audience. It is a style perceived by the character as unquestionably sincere, hence, not a style at all but a momentary expression of self possible even for an egregious nonwriter and nonreader like Lady Bertram or for such interlopers as Willoughby and Frank Churchill. Given the intensive privileging of texts and media, the illusion of words “spoken” from the heart usually requires battering the character beforehand with a total loss of self-esteem and possibly even of any future at all.

Writing purposes to be connected with the absent. Fanny’s wisdom brings this study to full circle with the phenomenological theory of representation that opened our in­quiry. The “language of real feeling” is the ace the author holds in her hand for the right moment in the action; and when played against the cacaphony of hackneyed utterance, it carries conviction. Those spontaneous moments when Darcy, Knightley, and Wentworth suddenly articulate their desire to marry the heroine endow a romantic convention with unusual power; but there are many lesser performances in Austen’s novels that convey the sense of feelings deeper than the writ­ten text can bear. As Jonathan Richardson urged, the artist “must not say all he can on his Subject, and so seem to distrust his Reader.” Writing is the dialogical means to the absent, and like the busy talkers in Austen’s stories, the insistence of the word is a function of the unsaid. Silence, in narrative as in music, is crucial to expression; and it is this power of arrested speech that strengthens a character’s presence and arouses our curiosity about her.